

Dhaka-Beijing ties are looking up

Bangladesh must work to ensure higher volume of export to China

The Bangladesh-China bilateral relationship is taking a new turn following the recent visit by our chief adviser to the world's second largest economy. The visit is being hailed as successful by experts as it opens up the potential to improve and expand the trade and cultural ties between the two countries. We agree with the experts, and believe we have a great opportunity—one we must fully utilise—in order to make the Dhaka-Beijing ties more economically relevant.

During his four-day official visit from March 26 to March 29, Bangladesh Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus had a bilateral meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, as well as meetings with the Chinese vice-president, vice-premier, water resources minister, and other dignitaries. The focus of this visit was set on fostering commitments and exploring various opportunities for trade, economic and cultural collaboration. The highlight of the visit was the Chinese government and businesses pledge to lend, invest and provide grants worth \$2.1 billion. Around 30 Chinese companies committed to investing nearly \$1 billion to establish a Chinese Industrial Economic Zone in Chattogram. Funds have been committed for the modernisation of Mongla port.

The Chinese government promised to urge Chinese firms to relocate their manufacturing plants in Bangladesh in order to diversify production destinations. Two other issues of importance to Bangladesh that were discussed were water resource management and resolution of the Rohingya crisis. On both fronts, China reassured Bangladesh of providing support. The necessity of initiating negotiations on a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) and optimising the investment agreement was acknowledged by both parties with due seriousness.

These are, indeed, signs of a bilateral relationship turning a new leaf. And if Bangladesh plays its cards right, it can be immensely beneficial for the country's economic and trade interests. Bringing in Chinese investment will surely boost our economy and help create many jobs. However, there are issues that need to be sorted out on the Bangladesh side. For one, despite zero-duty trade benefits offered by China, Bangladesh has failed to make proper utilisation of those benefits to expand its presence in the Chinese market, with shipments from Bangladesh hardly crossing the \$1-billion mark annually. Meanwhile, over the years, the volume of Chinese imports has steadily risen in Bangladesh. Bangladesh must rectify this imbalance and take full advantage of the zero-duty system to expand its product base in China.

Overall, we feel optimistic about this visit's outcomes and believe new opportunities have opened up to build and strengthen a thriving bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and China. What the Bangladesh side needs to do is be prudent, pragmatic and diligent in designing and finalising the pledges so that our own interests are protected. As the chief adviser said, the Dhaka-Beijing ties are ready for the next stage; we just have to make sure that it's done on an even footing.

Dhaka's dug-up roads need quick fixes

City authorities must enforce excavation guidelines properly

It is frustrating that many streets in Dhaka remain in a state of disrepair even months after being dug up by different utility service providers. The ubiquity of the problem is evident across the city, with our correspondents reporting unfinished trenches and piles of debris in many areas. These roads have become quite treacherous, with rickshaw wheels getting stuck and pedestrians tripping over loose soil and rubble. Many people, while talking to this daily, have complained about facing various problems. As well as risks of accidents, unrepaired roads are causing air pollution, traffic congestion, losses for businesses, and even forced relocation.

A glaring example is a kilometre-long stretch of Falpatti Road in West Senpara, where trenches dug nearly a year ago to upgrade Dhaka Wasa's supply line remain unrepaired. Not far away, a trench dug by Dhaka Electric Supply Company Ltd (Desco) along the western lane of Begum Rokeya Sarani connecting Kazipara to Mirpur-10 has been left half-finished. A similar situation, this time involving Dhaka Power Distribution Company Ltd (DPDC), is also unfolding on the road from Sipahibagh to Khilgaon Chowrasta. Documents show that in November last year, Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) approved road-cutting permits for 19 individuals and nine service-providing organisations in 44 areas. Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) also granted road excavation permissions for around 10 locations in February.

The question is, why are roads being dug without following guidelines or left without repairs? The 2019 Road Excavation Policy is quite clear in this regard: excavation should be done in only small sections at a time, with all work to be completed within 15 days, and roads promptly reinforced with sand and bricks. Additionally, debris should be cleared within 24 hours. Further provisions require that both the excavated road and its surface drains be thoroughly cleaned after completion. In reality, these guidelines are seldom enforced. Apparently, road repairs are the responsibility of city corporations. Utility service providers claim that they pay advance fees before obtaining permission to dig, and once their work is completed, corporations are supposed to handle the repairs.

Be that as it may, contractors and utility service providers cannot evade responsibility for violating multiple aspects of the excavation policy. While talking to this daily, the DNCC chief engineer said that preparations are underway to repair all dug-up roads by April 14. But given city corporations' track records, we remain sceptical. We urge the authorities to ensure no further delays so that the public can travel hassle-free. Non-compliant contractors must also be held accountable through fines and blacklisting.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

First call made from a handheld mobile phone



On this day in 1973, a Motorola engineer made the first known call from a handheld mobile phone. The 2.2-pound brick-size device, called the DynaTAC, wouldn't become commercially available for another decade, when it carried a price tag of about \$4,000.

A legal roadmap to recovering stolen assets



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With our central bank governor urging UK officials to help freeze large assets held there by erstwhile Bangladeshi political leaders, development partners agreeing to assist Bangladesh in building capacity to trace and recover siphoned or stolen assets, and global litigation funders trying to figure out what's going on in Bangladesh, one could easily conclude that Bangladesh is quite serious about reclaiming its illegally transferred assets.

The global movement of stolen public funds is not merely a financial issue. It is a legal battlefield involving jurisdictional complexities, procedural innovation, and an evolving interpretation of state responsibility. For Bangladesh, where estimates of laundered assets run into the billions, the need to go beyond surface-level investigations and into a rigorous legal strategy has never been more pressing.

Asset recovery begins not with courtroom drama but with detection. Stolen asset detection is not simply about spotting suspicious bank transactions. Rather, it requires building a credible, legally admissible chain of evidence that links illicit funds to a predicate offense such as fraud, embezzlement, or corruption. At this stage, states often rely on Suspicious Transaction Reports (STRs) flagged by financial institutions, along with cooperation from foreign jurisdictions under instruments like the Common Reporting Standard (CRS). However, Bangladesh must go further. The introduction of a robust Unexplained Wealth Order (UWO) framework, as seen in the UK under the Criminal Finances Act 2017, would allow courts to compel individuals to justify assets inconsistent with their known income. This reverses the evidentiary burden—a powerful tool when dealing with politically exposed persons who often hide behind opaque corporate structures.

Once assets are located, a state must determine whether to pursue a criminal suit, a civil suit, or both.

In many jurisdictions, including Bangladesh, criminal prosecution is the default route. But this strategy is slow and often ineffective when the accused resides abroad or when dual criminality is a challenge—where the foreign state does not recognise the offense as a crime under its own laws or when the money is easily embedded into the banking system. In such scenarios, civil recovery or non-conviction based forfeiture may offer more flexibility. These legal processes do not require a criminal conviction and are based on the “balance of



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

probabilities” standard rather than “beyond a reasonable doubt.” Several countries, including Kenya and Colombia, have successfully used civil recovery to reclaim funds without waiting for lengthy criminal trials.

When litigation begins, freezing the asset becomes the most urgent priority. Without it, the stolen funds may shift again, disappearing behind new layers of legal cover-up. Asset freezing typically occurs through mutual legal assistance (MLA) requests, which are formal legal petitions submitted from one country to another. However, MLA frameworks are only as good as the treaties supporting them. Bangladesh, despite signing the UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), has yet to establish bilateral Mutual Legal

Assistance Treaties (MLATs) with many key destination countries, including Switzerland, Australia, and Canada. This procedural gap severely limits its ability to act quickly. Beyond MLATs, Bangladesh should consider model provisions from the OECD's Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters, which facilitate real-time data sharing and can trigger provisional measures such as injunctions and restraining orders.

Legal theory alone is not enough. The recovery process is political. If the requesting state does not show political will—demonstrated by consistent court action, ministerial coordination, and diplomatic engagement—destination states are unlikely to cooperate. Even worse, inconsistent messaging at home undermines the credibility of recovery efforts abroad. Bangladesh must therefore institutionalise asset recovery as a long-term policy objective rather than an episodic political reaction. The creation of an independent Asset Recovery Authority



with legal autonomy and transnational reach would serve this purpose.

International cooperation remains a double-edged sword. While organisations like the World Bank's Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative (StAR) and Interpol's Anti-Corruption Coordination Centre offer technical support, actual enforcement depends on domestic capacity. Take, for example, the concept of Deferred Prosecution Agreements (DPAs), which are legally binding settlements where a company admits wrongdoing, pays restitution, and avoids conviction. Countries like the US and France have used DPAs to recover billions in corruption-related penalties, much of which can be repatriated to the affected country. Bangladesh has yet to explore this instrument in serious

We must adopt climate-smart urea management



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Bangladesh is one of the world's largest rice-producing countries, where rice is not just a staple food but also the backbone of the agricultural economy. Farmers across the country rely heavily on urea fertiliser, with approximately 2.7 million tonnes applied annually to boost productivity. However, conventional fertilisation methods, particularly surface broadcasting, have long been inefficient. A significant portion—65 to 70 percent—of the applied nitrogen is lost due to volatilisation, leaching, and runoff, which limits its effectiveness in supporting plant growth.

The economic consequences of this loss are staggering. With urea priced at \$359.33 per tonne, Bangladesh spends about Tk 10,000 crore (\$776 million) annually on fertiliser for rice cultivation. Since up to 70 percent of this fertiliser is wasted, the country incurs a financial loss of approximately Tk 6,500-7,000 crore every year. This waste not only increases production costs for farmers but also puts immense strain on government subsidies.

Moreover, nitrogen runoff from excessive urea application contributes to water pollution and eutrophication, a process that disrupts aquatic ecosystems by reducing oxygen levels in water bodies. Additionally, urea application releases nitrous oxide (N₂O), a greenhouse gas 300 times more potent than carbon dioxide, further exacerbating climate change. As Bangladesh grapples with food security challenges and environmental

degradation, it is crucial to adopt efficient, climate-smart agricultural practices to ensure long-term sustainability.

A climate-smart solution In response to these challenges, the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) has developed the BRRI Prilled Urea Applicator, a device that optimises urea use through urea deep placement (UDP). Unlike conventional surface broadcasting, UDP involves placing urea 7 to 10 centimetres below the soil surface, ensuring that more nitrogen is available for plant uptake while minimising losses.

Field trials in Gazipur, Rajbari, and Madaripur, during the 2024 T-Aman cultivation season, confirmed the applicator's effectiveness. Farmers who used the device reduced their urea use by 30 percent, leading to significant cost savings. This reduction meant that farmers who previously applied 24 kilograms of urea per bigha could now achieve the same or better results with just 16 kilograms per bigha, cutting down unnecessary expenses.

At a national level, if Bangladesh reduces urea use by 30 percent, this translates to an annual savings of Tk 3,000 crore, a financial relief that benefits both individual farmers and the government. These trials also revealed a six to 10 percent increase in rice yields, showing that better nitrogen management leads to higher productivity. Farmers not only spend less on fertiliser but also gain higher returns from their crops,

strengthening their financial security. Economic and environmental benefits

The BRRI Prilled Urea Applicator significantly lowers production costs by reducing fertiliser use without sacrificing yield. This makes rice farming more profitable and sustainable, particularly for smallholder farmers who struggle with high production costs.

Moreover, the BRRI Prilled Urea Applicator minimises nitrogen losses, ensuring that less urea escapes into the atmosphere and surrounding ecosystems including rivers and lakes. The field trials showed a 12 to 13 percent reduction in methane emissions and a 21 to 25 percent decrease in nitrous oxide emissions, making rice farming more environmentally responsible.

Adopting the BRRI Prilled Urea Applicator on a large scale aligns perfectly with Bangladesh's commitment to reducing its agricultural carbon footprint under the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) 2023-2050. It will also help Bangladesh transition to a more climate-resilient agricultural system by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving fertiliser efficiency.

Overcoming challenges to wider adoption

Despite its clear benefits, scaling up the adoption of the BRRI Prilled Urea Applicator has been a challenge. Many farmers are unfamiliar with UDP and may hesitate to switch from their traditional fertilisation methods. Without proper understanding, they might view the transition as unnecessary or difficult.

To address this, agricultural extension services must play a more active role in educating farmers. Training programmes, field demonstrations, and farmer cooperatives can help build confidence in using the BRRI Prilled Urea Applicator. The Department of

negotiations with foreign enforcement bodies.

Sanctions are often misunderstood as foreign policy tools, but in asset recovery, they can play a preventative role. Targeted sanctions, when imposed on individuals or enablers such as lawyers, bankers, and company formation agents, disrupt the infrastructure that supports laundering. The European Union's Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime and the US Magnitsky Act both offer pathways to impose such measures, but they require credible dossiers and sustained lobbying. If Bangladesh seeks this route, it must be prepared to present strong prima facie evidence to foreign regulators and build partnerships with civil society watchdogs abroad.

Critically, the source of the laundered funds should inform recovery tactics. Funds embezzled from bank loans often leave a paper trail through domestic institutions and may be easier to pursue via banking regulators or bankruptcy courts. In contrast, funds skimmed from infrastructure project payouts—especially via inflated contracts, offshore intermediaries, or mispriced goods—require forensic contract audits and international procurement expertise. Each source demands a tailored legal approach. A one-size-fits-all model will not work.

Finally, asset recovery does not end with repatriation. Misuse of recovered funds remains a major problem worldwide. In response, international best practices now demand post-recovery transparency frameworks. Nigeria's agreement with the World Bank to monitor repatriated Abacha funds is one such model. Bangladesh would do well to adopt similar commitments, not only to ensure proper utilisation but also to build public confidence in the legal process.

While the articles circulating in the national press have done well to raise public awareness, the legal architecture behind asset recovery demands far deeper engagement. Bangladesh now stands at a crossroads. If it is to recover what was stolen and prevent future loss, it must elevate asset recovery from political rhetoric to institutional strategy—supported by law, driven by evidence, and protected by international collaboration. The legal tools exist. The question is whether the state is ready to use them.